1. Is being served cold, watery salsa a red flag at a Mexican restaurant? What does it suggest about freshness, prep practices or the kitchen's approach to flavor?

If we refer to pico de gallo, it is a sauce that must be served cold from the kitchen to reach the diner at room temperature and most importantly made the same day to keep all the freshness of the ingredients. The tomato, cilantro and onion are very delicate.
About freshness, prep practices or the kitchen's approach to flavor.

Always use top quality ingredients: a vibrant green cilantro, not stained, firm but ripe tomatoes with lots of odor, and firm onions. When it comes to seasoning, do not overdo it with salt.
In many cases when a pico de gallo is served “Caldoso” or with excessive liquid
it is probably a sauce that has been prepared a few day ago. The liquid from the vegetables has been released.
As for green sauces or other sauces such as Tatemada sauces (green or red) that require a hot preparation and are served cold. It is preferable to serve them cold or at room temperature a day later to release all the flavors of the sauces.
Salsa should taste refreshing, alive, and like it was just made, not like it was scraped out of a refrigerated tub. ... Salsa should be served at room temperature but lightly cold, especially if it's just been made. That's when the flavors shine the most.

2. From an expert's perspective, what makes good salsa to serve with chips -- and should it be made fresh daily, served warm or balanced in a particular way?

What contributes to a delicious chip dip:

FRESH INGREDIENTS:
Tomatoes: Fresh, ripe, juicy tomatoes are the base for most dips.
Onion: White, red or yellow onion adds a sharp flavor.
Garlic: A small number of minced garlic adds depth and complexity to the sauce
Chiles: Jalapeños, serrano’s or other chiles add heat, but adjust the amount to your taste. It s level the seasoning like salt.
Cilantro: Chopped fresh cilantro adds a bright, herbaceous flavor.
Lime or lemon juice: Citrus juice adds a bright, tangy flavor and helps balance the other ingredients.

TASTE ENHANCERS:

Cumin: Ground cumin adds an earthy, warm flavor.

Salt: Salt is essential to bring out the flavors and balance the sauce.

Optional: Sugar or a touch of honey can help to balance the acidity, especially if very sour tomatoes are used.

TEXTURE:

Chunky or smooth: Decide whether you prefer a sauce with visible chunks of the ingredients or a smoother, more homogeneous sauce.

Let it rest: Allow the salsa to sit in the refrigerator for at least an hour to allow the flavors to meld.

6.Why are tortillas such a telling part of a Mexican restaurant's quality -- what should diners look for in terms of texture, flavor or freshness?

7. Do handmade tortillas automatically signal higher quality, or are there other indicators -- like sourcing, regional style, or technique -- that matter just as much?

Ingredients: Authentic Mexican tortillas are usually made with high high-quality, locally sourced corn (masa harina) or flour, which contributes to their flavor. The corn used in traditional tortillas is often nixtamalized, a process that enhances their flavor and nutritional value.

Preparation methods: Many Mexican tortillas are made by hand and cooked on a comal, which gives them a unique flavor and texture. The cooking method allows for better control of heat and time, resulting in a fresher flavor.

Freshness: In Mexico, tortillas are usually made and sold fresh daily, sometimes within hours of cooking. This freshness enhances the flavor and overall dining experience.

Cultural practices: The preparation of tortillas is deeply rooted in Mexican culture, with many families passing down traditional recipes and techniques. This cultural significance often leads to greater emphasis on quality and flavor.

Service and Pairing: Tortillas in Mexico are commonly served with a variety of savory dishes, such as tacos, enchiladas and quesadillas, which can be enhanced through complementary flavors and textures.